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AUTHOR Cohen, Allan J.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

The relationship between freshmen college persistence and self-report variables and objective academic indices is investigated. Follow-up data on persistence or non-persistence was gathered one and one-half years later, allowing one semester for attrition. Results indicate male non-persisters came from relatively low socioeconomic status families and demonstrate lower high school performance than their persisting peers. They do not perceive their role as that of family supporter, and express little emotion at prospects of academic dismissal. Female non-persisters often are married, feel college and grades are of little importance, did not do as well in high school as their persisting peers and expect to acquire fewer academic degrees. They also exhibit lower self-concept than their persisting counterparts. (Author/BEF)

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FACTORS RELATED TO FRESHMAN COLLEGE ATTRITION

by

Allan J. Cohen
Veterans Administration Hospital
Sepulveda, California

Alan Jay Mann
California State University
Northridge, California

Dee L. Shepherd-Look
California State University
Northridge, California

Western Psychological Association Convention
San Diego, California

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FACTORS RELATED TO FRESHMAN COLLEGE ATTRITION

In general, we may classify attrition research into a number of rather broad categories, determined largely by the types of variables under investigation. Many studies seek to investigate the roles of such variables as academic indices, personality characteristics, familial and socio-economic background and institutional characteristics in some depth. Others have adopted a more multivariate approach to ascertain how these and other variables interwork in the attrition problem.

The present investigation falls into this latter category. It is a multivariate study of 136 self-report variables and 8 objective academic indices with a three-fold purpose. First, to identify the salient characteristics of the non-persisting freshman student. Second, to ascertain the efficacy of utilizing primarily self-report data in the prediction of freshman college attrition. Third, to determine the predictive validity of a questionnaire designed specifically for use in the present research.

METHOD

Subjects. A total of 593 Introductory Psychology students at the California State University, Northridge, participated as volunteer subjects in the present research. All subjects were freshmen who had completed 32 semester units or less of college credit. The sample was composed of 225 males (37.9%) and 368 females (62.1%) all ranging in age from 16 to 48 years with a mean age of 18.07 years. A total of 537 Ss (90.6%) were first semester freshmen, 39 (6.6%) had completed one semester of college coursework and 17 (2.8%) were transfer students or those who were returning after previously withdrawing.

No potential S was included in the study and subsequent data analysis if they did not grant permission for the authors to access confidential university files or whose instructor did not allow the administration of the data gathering questionnaire at the regular class meeting.

Instrument: Student Survey Questionnaire. The Student Survey Questionnaire (SSQ) is a 136-item self-report instrument designed as a pilot or prototype to determine whether or not such a questionnaire might be utilized in the identification of those students at high risk for early withdrawal from college. It is composed of 125 forced-choice and 11 open-ended items with the forced-choice items approximately evenly divived between Lykert-type and multiple-choice questions.

All of the SSQ items were designed to gather data on eight (8) broad variable categories believed to be related to freshman attrition:

1. biographic and demographic variables (18 items)

2. family background and perceptions of parental attitudes and/or behavior (30 items)
3. academic history and future plans (12 items)
4. self-estimates of achievement, adjustment and performance (12 items)
5. perceptions of the college environment (13 items)
6. self-concept ratings (26 items)
7. motivational variables (19 items)
8. sources of social support (6 items)

All SSQ items were selected and developed either on the basis of past research or the "intuitive feelings" of the authors as to their predictive value in college attrition.

Procedure. Data collection for the present investigation was a three-phase process utilizing information from two sources. In Phase I, conducted in the first four (4) weeks of the fall semester, the SSQ was administered to intact classes to gather all self-report data. Phase II consisted of gathering objective academic data from the university computer student files. Such data as high school grade point average, Scholastic Aptitude Test scores and enrollment status were collected directly from these files to ensure the accuracy of this information. In Phase III, conducted early in the succeeding spring term, follow-up data as to the attrition or retention of all Ss were gathered from university files. In addition, data on academic variables (such as college GPA and probation status) for the semester under investigation were also collected in this phase.

On the basis of the data collected in Phase III, Ss were divided into two (2) comparison groups. Those Ss who did not withdraw or were not dismissed from coursework at the university comprised the Persister Group. The Non-persister Group was composed of those Ss who had withdrawn, been dismissed or had transferred to another institution.

A total of 48 Ss (8.1%) comprised the Non-persister Group with 15 males (31.2%) and 33 females (68.8%). All statistical comparisons were based on the Persister vs. Non-persister Groups as well as by sex.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Data Analysis Procedures. Four separate data analysis procedures were applied to the data in this investigation. First, frequency-within-response-category distributions were obtained for all items and objective academic variables. This procedure allowed the authors to collapse data over those categories necessary for subsequent analysis. Then, chi-square and Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient analyses were performed on the data. Finally, a step-wise linear multiple regression analysis was also carried out on the data.

For the sake of brevity, we would like to present the significant results of this study in terms of profiles of the male and female non-persister student.

The Female Non-Persister. The female non-persister is more often married and has significantly more dependents than her persisting counterparts. Although no differences were found in religious orientation, non-persisters rated themselves as being significantly "weaker" in their religious beliefs.

Female non-persisters rated their fathers as less "supportive" and "optimistic" and their mothers as less "interested" and "optimistic" than their persisting peers. The non-continuing female student also had fewer siblings who had attended and/or completed college. She rated herself as more "alienated" and "easily bored" as well as less "assertive" and "emotionally stable" than the continuing female student. The non-persisting female placed less importance on education, most often attended college for personal growth and had fewer friends who went on to college after high school. She sought a significantly lower academic degree, placed less emphasis on grades and predicted, more often than not, that she would not complete her university education.

The female non-persister rated herself as being less goal-oriented and having less drive to achieve and academic ability than her continuing counterpart. Moreover, she predicted having more difficulty in coping with both the academic and social demands of college life. The non-continuing female student perceived the college environment as less "pleasant" and "challenging" while more "irrelevant" and "cold" than her persisting peers.

The female non-persister also demonstrated a significantly lower high school grade point average and predicted a lower college GPA.

The Male Non-Persister. The profile of the male non-persister follows much the same pattern as the female non-continuing student with some notable exceptions. For example, no significant differences were found in marital status for persisters and non-persisters, yet non-persisters worked significantly more hours per week while in school.

Male non-continuing students rated their fathers as less "supportive" and less "interested" with no sinificant differences being found in ratings of maternal attitudes. The male non-persister was more likely to come from a lower socio-economic status family in which the primary language is not English.

The male non-persister rated themselves as less "active", less "intelligent" and less "conforming" than his continuing counterparts. He more often came to college because his parents expected it and predicted less emotional distress at the prospect of academic dismissal. Furthermore, they predicted difficulty in coping with the academic demands of university life. They also stated that they were less goal-oriented than their persisting counterparts.

The male non-continuing student perceived the college environment as larger, more chaotic and more inflexible than his persisting peers.

Unlike the female non-persister, the male dropout demonstrated a significant tendency toward college attrition. He had completed more semesters and units and had more previous withdrawals and no-shows. Furthermore, he more often attended college to learn a profession yet he was more unsure of his occupational goal.

The male non-persister also demonstrated a significantly lower high school grade point average.

Multiple Regression Analysis. A total of 22 variables were entered into a step-wise linear multiple regression for male Ss. The results of this analysis indicated that these variables accounted for 29.16% of the total variance in attrition for males. Nine (9) of these variables, believed to be the best set of linear predictors of persistence, accounted for 25.58% of the total variance. These nine variables were, in order of total variance accounted for:

1. college environment rating of "chaotic" (6.43%)
2. semesters completed (5.71%)
3. ratings of the father as "interested" (3.7%)
4. "parents expected it" as a reason for college (2.44%)
5. number of previous withdrawals (1.85%)
6. number of clubs and organizations (1.59%)
7. stated ability to cope with academic demands (1.53%)
8. college environment rating "flexible" (1.18%)
9. enrollment status (1.14%)

The results of multiple regression analysis for females indicated that 10 of the 35 selected input variables were the best set of linear predictors of attrition (i.e. accounted for more than 1% of the total variance). These variables were:

1. "for personal growth" as a reason for college (4.13%)
2. number of friends in college (2.59%)
3. self-ratings of "assertive" (2.4%)
4. stated ability to cope with social demands (2.03%)
5. amount of income spent on necessities (1.5%)
6. highest academic degree sought (1.49%)
7. rating of the college environment as "competitive" (1.35%)
8. college environment rating of "pleasant" (1.26%)
9. ratings of the father as "supportive" (1.08%)
10. " to increase earning potential" as a reason for college attendance (1.0%)

In total, the 35 input variables accounted for 24.48% of the variance in attrition for females. The 10 variables selected as the best linear predicters accounted for 19.13% of the total variance in attrition for the female Ss.